

## An (unintentional) façade of democratic debate

Jonathan Newman  
Associate Tutor in Anthropology  
University of Sussex  
E: [J.M.B.Newman@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:J.M.B.Newman@sussex.ac.uk)

In October 2012, Par Engstrom and Andrei Gomez-Suarez organised a roundtable discussion on the Colombian peace process at the UCL Institute of the Americas.<sup>1</sup> Since then, a series of similar events have continued the discussions through the year. I see a growing consensus among attendees that I have talked to that the talks in Havana will culminate in a signed agreement between the Colombian government and FARC. The positive enthusiasm at these events contrasts with the slow process in Havana in which no substantial details have emerged and nothing will be agreed until everything is agreed.

In the midst of this UK-based activity, the Colombian state, in the form of the Ambassador, consular staff and occasional political allies, has sought to engage first hand in the discussions. Their attendance is augmented by a highly approachable and consultative approach whereby these representatives of the Colombian state will, to the best of my knowledge, talk to anyone attending. I personally believe that this approach is a different way of doing politics than most people are used to from the Colombian Government and that it is an effort to move from elitist towards more democratic political change. My observation is that they want the debates and discussions to take place, and they want to explain the policies and actions of the Colombian government and to encourage participation of all those with an interest to participate in changing Colombia for the better.

Of course by being approachable and by seeking opinion they are also putting themselves in the line of criticisms that would never have come if they had maintained a distance and shown no interest in what anyone thought. My commentary will shortly exploit this very weakness, but before I do that I wish to make it clear that the critique is not looking at individual political motives nor is it a repeat of the mantra of a criminal Colombian state. Instead I am trying to see an emergent discourse within the new consultative approach.

I, like many other people following these debates through the polite ambience of governmental, academic and institutional forums of the South-East of England, am beginning to form an opinion, not just about the progress in the peace talks but essentially about the current Colombian administration too. Personally, I am finding that my critical capacity (which often is in overdrive) is being replaced by the belief that the government has the intellectual and political capacity to bring a peace deal to the Colombian people that will not only bring to the end 60 years of conflict but

---

<sup>1</sup> Engstrom Par and Andrei Gomez-Suarez "Colombia 2013: Towards ending the longest armed conflict in the Western Hemisphere?" *UCL Institute of the Americas Policy Brief*, London, Nov 28, 2012

also transform the Colombian state into a far less corrupt and more socially benign authority. Note my position, I believe that the Santos administration, not FARC, nor any other body, can bring the peace deal. As I have got to know the protrusions of that state that interact with me, I am growing to trust them.

What stands out in all the talking about 'the talks' is that the identifiable and transparent presence of the Colombian state is not paralleled by an identifiable and transparent representation of FARC; unlike Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland, there is no political wing here engaged with us chattering classes. While the position of the Santos administration is accessible and, at times, professionally presented, there is no similar communication with FARC. Their proscription forms a shadow that follows our chatter silently around the room; FARC cannot be present, they remain outlaws.

There is occasionally the surreptitious presence of certain refugees. Here, those in the know of particular complex Colombian histories might suspect (or be silently certain) that specific people in the room are closer to the FARC or another leftist organisation than is transparently clear. Such it is that that we find ourselves immersed in insinuation and gossip, pointing a finger of political association, which in these times of liminality, translates into their past or future guilt, heroism or danger. As we try to analyse what is happening we repeat the very format that led to the presence of so many Colombian refugees in London in the first place. Once again the consequences of political outlaws is that their views cannot be as openly expressed as those of the Colombian state.

Our talks about 'the talks' are therefore refracted by the absence of true debate and the remnants of solipsism. The performance of transparency by agents of the Colombian government is but one side of the coin, on the other side are the more concealed and disguised performances by all interested parties, including the Colombian government.

The distribution of power, between FARC and the Santos administration, in courting the opinion of international government, media, academics, business, security analysts, NGOs and so on is exemplified by the events in the last week of September 2013. When the Reverend Jesse Jackson, a US civil rights leader and Democrat, announced to the international press that he was on a mission to release US hostage Kevin Scott Sutay, I initially was trying to work out how this apparently random event had come together. The news revealed that it was a largely pragmatic set of events whereby Jackson had been at a meeting of black leaders in Cartagena where he offered to help release the hostage, upon which FARC immediately invited him to Cuba. Santos promptly tweeted back an emphatic 'No!' and, at the time of writing, the story runs on with Jackson saying he is going to help anyway. Behind those events lies another story.

For most of his life the Reverend Jesse Jackson has had a magnetic attraction towards cases of injustice and an equally strong pull towards the media. The FARC-Jackson event brought significant international press coverage, more importantly it hooked the US networks too. Jackson had a cause to relieve suffering somewhere in

the world accompanied by the media attention that, like many others, he relishes. Meanwhile FARC, for the first time since the talks began, had some celebrity coverage. If Jesse Jackson was talking to the “leftists” (as much US media labelled FARC) then he was also beginning to legitimise them as something other than a terrorist organisation. Moreover, Jackson was not demanding that FARC release the US hostage, instead he was working with them to help the release. Jackson took the message to the US population that FARC did not want to keep US citizens captive. The message stood in contrast to the Santos administration that had a far more circumspect approach to the issue; for the Santos administration, beyond the announcements of clear government lines of practice being drawn, dealing with FARC remained in the realm of closed-door politics.

At about the same time Alejandro Eder, the director for the Colombian Agency for Reintegration, met the Pope (President Santos had also met His Holiness only a couple of weeks earlier), presenting the pontiff with a Colombian football shirt signed by none other than the great, and internationally recognised, Valderrama. That week, in the battle of the *brigadas* for an international platform, the Colombian government sided with the head of the Catholic Church and FARC grabbed an Afro-American civil rights campaigner (possibly creating the first prime time appearance of an Afro leader at the Havana talks).

The lines between power and resistance, the haves and have-nots, the Nation and the civilian, empowered and marginalised, were clearly demarcated in the independent international performances of the Santos administration and FARC. The Colombian government was following established norms of international diplomacy and FARC were left with a very different engagement with international commentators and analysts – the Pope had not invited FARC to the Vatican to present him with the football shirt of the nation, and Santos had not resorted to a moment of media opportunity by showcasing Jesse Jackson alongside his political agenda. Like the talks in London, the international establishment was predominantly being courted by just one party of the negotiating table, with the other party manoeuvring for space on the sidelines. As if to emphasise how the dynamics of public engagement had not changed between the two sides, FARC’s entry into the media spotlight was through the illegitimacy of armed kidnapping and the government through the legitimacy of state protocols.

So while it is a positive and worthwhile initiative for the Colombian government in the UK to meet with people, regardless of public stature or influence, as one of those people I would welcome an opportunity for a mechanism to be put in place whereby representatives of FARC could be officially invited to these meetings as well, not just to give a speech but to mix with and listen to those attendees, regardless of their public stature or influence. Both sides of this bloody conflict need to be able to openly demonstrate their humility and willingness to participate in wider debate.

Without such a measure, and with the continuation of a largely one-sided public consultation/public relations exercise there are two interrelated consequences. Firstly, it suggests that the illegality of FARC prevents the organisation from being

able to engage in similar public interactions. If the thinking of the Colombian government is that conflict is better dealt with through debate and democratic politics than through resort to violence then, given that FARC currently has no recognised political representatives who can legally take part in such public discussions, how are they going to begin? One factor guiding the Northern Ireland peace process was that Sinn Fein and the Unionists had a good understanding of public opinion because of years of interacting with the public through consultation and public relations; FARC do not have such legally established mechanisms. Gerry Adams could visit the White House prior to the agreement being signed; can FARC representatives do the same?

The second consequence is possibly more disturbing. As the Colombian government attends successive meetings, consultations and inter-state forums in many parts of the world they are simultaneously promoting their own political initiatives. In the absence of scandals over parapolitics and the killing of trade unionists that impaired previous administrations relations with US Congress and Europe, the current administration have an air of legitimacy in the International Community that has evaded many predecessors. They are counselling a particularly wide range of opinion, while demonstrating that they are a responsible government that is trying to find the best means possible to end the conflict. As I said before, the presentation we get is that they are trying to bring FARC to an agreement, not that two parties are negotiating. In these circumstances if an agreement is not reached then FARC will have shown itself to be unwilling to participate in the type of democratic debate that the current government has taken great efforts to promote.

Moreover, a further continual theme coming from the Colombian government is the extent of criminality within FARC.<sup>2</sup> Here the government either ignores corruption and criminality within its own institutions or at best suggests that it is successfully containing these problems while promoting the idea of a high ratio of criminal, rather than political, actors, within FARC. FARC members remain an isolated force in the jungle unaccustomed to civilised society, illiterate and socially immature, and they face upon demobilisation either a difficult journey of reformation or the more tempting option of high earning criminality. A major challenge of the peace process, that the government presents us with is not moving FARC away from violent politics, instead the emphasis is on drawing these combatants away from violent criminality.

The line between the criminal and the political is being drawn and will be the post-Havana standard by which politics and violence is dealt with. In such a scenario, if FARC do not sign an agreement then they will have demonstrated that their criminal interests exceed their ideological agenda – those who wish to carry on with armed action will be deemed criminals rather than political guerrillas. If FARC do sign, whoever does not agree with the agreement once again becomes criminalised. Some might object to this formula, but in the eyes of the international community who have for the past year been courted by the democratic aspirations of the Colombian government, and have already been informed about the problems of

---

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-24331741> (accessed 3rd Oct 2013)

criminality within FARC, the formula makes sense. Moreover, in the recent protests in Colombia the government made it very clear that they would not tolerate violence (by the protestors or anyone associated with the protest). The line was drawn between political actions and violent actions; violence was deemed criminal not political.

We are moving from a 'war on terror' to a 'war on crime', where the political can be easily criminalised. This might be a positive step forward, Colombia moves from a small war scenario to the state regaining the absolute legitimacy of force within its borders. However, with the international community seduced by Santos' enthusiasts of democratic freedoms, those areas within Colombia that are defined as under criminal control could see as much military force as necessary used to 'liberate' the citizens without fear of international interference. In this scenario, like Sri Lanka, citizen casualties all disappear in a well-conducted news conference.

As I said earlier, I do not believe that this is another example of a criminal state or that the participation in debate and consultation by government representatives has a sinister motive. What I do believe is that the consequences of the current manner of political interaction means that FARC remain isolated and that the Colombian government is gaining more credibility and trust than is safe for the state that has not got an established history of respecting human rights.

Therefore I ask in this blog that the Colombian government publically announce the limits of force that they will use in order to tackle the expected criminality in locations with residual combatants. For example, a statement condemning the strategy of the Sri Lankan government, as they cleansed areas occupied by remaining Tamil Tigers, would be an effective way of signalling the less barbaric intentions of the Colombian government. Additionally I ask, as the lines between violent criminality and politics are inscribed deeper into the social change agenda (against a background of increasingly legitimate state force), how will the Colombian government differentiate the violently political (which affects all democracies) from the violently criminal?

Finally, I would very much like the Colombian government to keep talking to everyone, in fact please extend the exercise, but please let the less than legal sides participate with this approach too; stop interfering with debate by confining them to the margins of the jungle. Can we expand the guest lists so that we can share the wine and canapés with a broader spectrum of Colombian political opinion and, moreover, with a more openly representative reflection of 'the talks'?